

SOVIET SAID TO ASK SPACE SHUTTLE HALT

Linkage to the U.S. Program Puts
Early Accord on Antisatellite
Weapon Curbs in Doubt

By RICHARD BURT

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 31 — Government officials said today that the Soviet Union had called for a halt in the development of the American space shuttle, virtually ruling out the possibility of an early accord limiting antisatellite weapons.

The United States has been eager to induce the Soviet Union to agree on the limitation of such weapons in time for the signing of the new strategic arms treaty June 18 by President Carter and Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet leader.

The antisatellite weapons, also known as "killer satellites," are space vehicles designed to track and destroy other orbiting craft, such as communications and surveillance satellites.

At present, only the Soviet Union is known to have operational antisatellite weapons, and President Carter has sought to give priority to curbs on such weapons. Officials believe that an agreement would protect reconnaissance satellites from interference and thus bolster the assertion of the United States that it can adequately verify the new arms treaty.

Soviet Views Shuttle as Threat

However, in recent negotiations, the Soviet Union has raised a number of points that make an early antisatellite accord unlikely, the officials said.

The chief obstacle, they said, is a Soviet demand that a proposed moratorium on the testing of such weapons include the space shuttle, the manned cargo spacecraft being developed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The shuttle, which is scheduled for its first test flight in November, is the centerpiece of American plans for all activity in space, both civilian and military.

The shuttle is a reusable vehicle that can be launched like a rocket, fly in orbit like a spacecraft and return to a runway landing like a glider. Since it is designed to make as many as a hundred flights without overhaul, its supporters say that the shuttle will greatly reduce the cost of placing payloads in orbit. The shuttle would become the means for hoisting communications, weather and navigation satellites into orbit.

Not Designed for Antisatellite Use

Although the Pentagon is a participant in the shuttle program and would use the craft to orbit military satellites, officials said the shuttle itself was not being designed for antisatellite missions.

Nevertheless, officials said, the Soviet Union views the shuttle as a threat to its satellites and therefore pressed the United States to halt its testing program.

An official close to the talks called the Soviet position "totally unacceptable."

"We would never agree to terminate the shuttle or even to slow it down," he said.

Before the Soviet call for a halt in the shuttle program, the United States hoped to complete an accord in time for the Brezhnev-Carter meeting so that progress might continue to be made on arms control.

The possibility of controlling antisatellite systems had been raised by President Carter early in his Administration, but it was not until early this year that the Soviet Union indicated an interest.